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ABSTRACT

Various techniques for encouraging writing among kindergarten children are described in this paper. Techniques include: (1) dictating stories; (2) establishing the format of a text by using repetitive patterns, the rhythm of the language, cumulative patterns, the familiarity of a story or story line, and familiar sequences; (3) using "I-Searches" written in the first person and emphasizing truth-telling and clear language; (4) teaching writing with a phonics approach; (5) using life skill writing, or "real life writing," in simulated natural settings; (6) using journals, which allow children to write for themselves and choose their own topics. Concluding remarks focus on the place of writing in the kindergarten curriculum. (RH)

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WRITING:
The Common Denominator of a Kindergarten Curriculum

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INTRODUCTION

Recently, I was asked to join a group of teachers appointed by our school district to update the curriculum for Kindergarten classes. My initial excitement was blunted, however, when I soon realized that the one unquestioned foundation upon which the entire writing program would be structured was penmanship, not communication skills. Even though we live in a time when "literacy," "problem solving," and "critical thinking" are popular phrases, many educators retain a certain traditional tunnel vision, which obscures the demonstrable fact that five year old children can and do write to think and to communicate.

In the last couple of decades a number of scholars have given careful attention to how young children learn to write. Graves (1983, p.5) says, "Children want to write. For years we have underestimated their urge to make marks on paper. We have underestimated that urge because of a lack of understanding of the writing process..." Clay (1975, p. 46) states, "With a few letters and the will to write, the eager child will rapidly extend his repertoire, extracting more knowledge from helpful adults, his books, and the printed language in his environment."

Many educators feel that a child must learn to read prior to learning to write--that he must at least understand the phonemic system

so he can put words on a page. Some research, however, tells us the opposite may be true. For example, Clay (1975) feels that writing behaviors act as organizers of reading behaviors. Another scholar, Ronald Cramer (1978) feels that reading and writing must be taught together as a unity. The important point here, however, is that a writing program is a necessary complement of a reading program--that it stresses meaning while demanding the child pay attention to the details of print.

You might ask, "How can a child write when he doesn't know his letters and sounds?" Cramer (1978, p. 47) answers that question by saying, "When spelling and other mechanical concerns are removed as a central constraint, writing becomes immediately possible," Graves(1983) feels that a child can begin his own writing if he has command of just six consonants, any six! With those letters and their respective sounds at his disposal, a child can use invented spelling to record his message. Clay(1975) and Cramer(1978) remind us to look carefully at each child's writing efforts--that all "errors" are interestingly correct. Every mark and symbol which a child seriously (and sometimes not so seriously) places on a paper should be used in a positive way as a guide to show the teacher where that child is developmentally.

I developed my writing program slowly, often hesitatingly, because I, too, was uncertain about a five year old's capabilities. Now that I've been at it a while, however, I believe there is no magic order to the process, so long as certain areas of development are covered and as long

as the teacher keeps in mind that the most single and basic techniques should be first used to assure that the "net" captures the attention of the least developed child. While Graves, Calkins (1983), and others strongly believe that the choice of the writing topic remain solely in the child's hands, I believe that young children need some teacher direction if only to introduce new writing forms. Pinnell (1975) found that young children didn't use all the different language functions unless directed to do so Her research indicates that teachers need to plan genuine communication experiences in both the oral and written mode to incorporate all the language functions. I started by taking dictations from the children, moved to what I call "language format" writing, and began experimenting with children using invented spelling to actually record their own texts. I fluctuated between assigning specific writing tasks to the children, asking the children to model language patterns of other authors, and allowing the children total choice of their writing text. These various techniques for encouraging writing with my Kindergarteners is the basis of this paper.

STICKER STORIES

Cramer (1978, p. 31) states that, "Personal authorship, through dictation, establishes for the child an immediately observable relationship between the spoken and written word. There is no faster or more effective means of laying bare the mystery of print than individual dictation."

An excellent technique to develop oral fluency was first demonstrated to me by a teacher from Roseville, California--Bev Bos. Commercial stickers become the impetus to stimulate the child's dictations. First I compile a group of papers and put a sticker on each one. Then I ask a child to search through my papers until he finds a sticker which reminds him of a story he needs to tell me. I tell the child that his story can be about the sticker, but that the sticker might just remind him of something else he wants to say. When the child dictates, I write his language exactly as he says it. Upon completion of the story, I always read the story back to the child and ask if he would like to make any changes. Interestingly enough, very few of my children are willing to revise even their spoken language. Graves' (1983) explanation of this phenomenon is that very young writers are protected from self-criticism by their own egocentricity, they write for themselves, and they seldom let an audience spoil their own fun.

I gain a great deal of knowledge about my children as language users with this project--their ability to sequence, their knowledge of verb

usage, their use of pronouns, their cohesion of thoughts. (When attempting this project, several of my fellow Kindergarten teachers were horrified to discover children who were unable to communicate in complete sentences.) Clay (1975) feels that dictation reduces frustration for the verbal child who has a great deal to say but who has poor motor coordination and/or very few writing skills.

DOG STORIES

After reading several stories about dogs to stimulate discussion and thought, I give each child a booklet with a cover and two blank pages inside. On the cover we do a directed drawing of a dog. See Appendix A. On the first blank page, we cluster the word dog using rebus pictures instead of words around the cluster. Then while the children are coloring their covers and rebus pictures, I take dictation from one child at a time, asking that child to tell me any story he wishes about a dog. Most children need to tell me whether their stories are true or pretend. To publish, I read the stories aloud to the group. Fran Terras from Reno, Nevada shared this idea with me.

Language Format

Language Format is a technique which allows young children to cross a bridge from primitive skills to reading and writing preparedness by coaxing the students to "fill in the blank" and create predictable text which they can then read. By using repetitive patterns, rhythm of the language, cumulative patterns, familiarity of a story or story line, and familiar sequences, the format for the text is established. The child then adds his part to the format so that the text becomes in fact his own writing. The child's illustrations always accompany the text because they become the visual clues necessary to trigger the young reader/writer's recall. Because a small child believes he can read his own books, he practices often, and a success cycle begins. May, (1986, p. 93) states, "By using reading materials with predictable language, teachers can provide children with practice in fluent, successful reading, thus helping them to develop an effective concept of the reading process."

This kind of writing is eminently practicable. Where so many Kindergarten teachers are attempting to teach sixty children a day, the question, "How can you possibly take dictation from so many children on a regular basis?" is a common one. Pre-writing some of the predictable sections of the text makes the task more manageable.

A common criticism of this writing is that it is not student directed and therefore not meaningful. While there is some merit to this argument, I include it in my writing program because the students gain a sense that they "own" their work. This sense of belonging combined with the easy readability of the books offers the young reader/writer a sense of accomplishment and an honest curiosity for higher skills.

SHAPE BOOKS

After reading **The Little Circle** by Ann Atwood I divide my class into four groups and give each group a different shape booklet--a circle, a square, a rectangle, and a triangle. Each group clusters the possible things that their shape could be. Then each child writes his own book using the ideas from the cluster in this format.

This is a circle
Or it could be a button
Or it could be a rollerskate wheel
Or it could be an eye
But it is not a giraffe. by Elisa

This is a triangle
Or it could be a wizard's hat
Or it could be a piece of pizza
Or it could be a sailboat sail
But it is not a banana. by Camon

MAMA BOOKS

After learning Bev Boss's song, "What Does Your Mama Do?", we write our own songs for our moms for Mother's Day using Boss' tune and language format. Each child draws his own mom's face on the cover of his book, adding yarn for her hair. Then I ask that each child tell me three

somethings he thinks his mom really does do while he's in school for the first three pages and an outrageous something she might do for the last page. The last page is meant to give mom a giggle. We make a Big Book to sing for all the moms, and each child is asked to sing his own version to his own mom later. Here is a sample:

What does your mama do? What does your mama do?
What does your mama do while you're in school?
What does your mama do? What does your mama do?
What does your mama do while you're in school?
She cleans the house.
She goes to the bank.
She goes to the church.
She jumps on the school. by Joe

I-Search

"I-Search", as defined by Ken Macrorie, is a paper in which the student searches for information and truth about a topic in which he is absolutely interested. This paper uses first hand resources--interview and actual observation--as primary sources for information. Books, periodicals, and film are used as secondary sources. While part of the paper must be objective, it must also be written in the subjective voice or the first person, "I". The emphasis of the paper is truth telling and clear language. I-Search differs from the traditional research in that it is student-centered rather than teacher-centered.

In my Kindergarten I have adapted the traditional I-Search by using literature as the impetus for creating a need to know something. After reading **Guess Who My Favorite Person Is** by Byrd Baylor, a book about favorite things, I help my children devise eight questions they want to ask someone in their families. See Appendices B and C. When the interview forms are returned, we graph five of the eight answers to determine how many similar answers we have. (It is interesting to note that many of my children interview more than one member of their family.) When all the interviews have been returned, graphed, and discussed, I give each child a booklet containing four blank pages and ask each child to think of any four different favorite things he wants me to write in his book. Usually, only my advanced students write their own stories. After each child shares his book with the class, I choose some of the children's favorite things and set them to the music "My Favorite Things" from **The Sound of Music** so that we can sing our own version of that song.

This particular writing project is valuable for several reasons. First, it stirs discussion--talk between child and family members, talk between child and friends, talk between child and classmates, talk between child and teacher. Torbe and Medway (1981) have some interesting observations about talk. Here are several:

> "...it seemed clear that what happens in talk is crucial to the learning of the talker."

> "The idea that speech and writing are preceded by thought, and that the language act is the product of thought and learning is only partially true; it seems also true that talking and writing generate thoughts and learning."

This kind of project encourages critical thinking. The interviews and the ensuing class discussions lead children to an internalization of their own ideas. It builds excellent bridges between the public and the school system as family members and family friends become overt participants in an academic school experience. It is fun. The children have a proprietary interest versus a scholarly reason to know something.

Writing as a Phonics Approach

ABC PUPPETS

There is a great deal of research which indicates that children need to have a whole language approach rather than a phonics approach to learning to read--that reading should be a whole to part experience. (May, 1986; Cramer, 1978; Hoskisssson/Tompkins, 1987) This is not to say, however, that phonics should not be a part of a good reading program. Rather we need to avoid teaching isolated phonics skills out of context of what we are reading. With that research fresh in my head, I set about trying to teach beginning auditory discrimination and letter to sound discrimination of words, skills tested on our Kindergarten Critereon Tests, in a meaningful way.

In my classroom we work on a letter for the week--inundating the children with the look and sound of that letter by using a puppet show, a song; a cooking experience, several art projects, books, and even Show and Tell. In the past I used a commercial book filled with stories and songs as the language for the puppets we used in our puppet theater. However, I realized that my children could write their own stories and songs, and that not only would they be more meaningful, but I would have a visual as well as an auditory learning experience.

To introduce the letter, I hold up a puppet and ask the children to identify it. I might respond, "Yes, this is a monster. Our letter for this week is Mm as in monster. Let's decide on a name for our monster. It must begin with an Mm." Then as a total group we proceed to make up a story

about the monster using as many Mm words as possible. After asking questions such as, "Where will he live? What does he eat? What does he do? Who are his friends?" I record the story on chart paper. Then we use the information in the story to write a song about the monster, using the tunes of familiar nursery songs such as "Twinkle, Twinkle Little Star," or "Old McDonald Had a Farm," or "Row, Row, Row Your Boat." Again I record the song on chart paper. Later in the week, I ask individual children to illustrate both the story and song for easier recall when reading. We can use the charts for such skill checks as, "Circle all the capital M's or all the small m's," "Show me the word 'monster'," "Put your hands around the word that shows where the monster lives."

INDIVIDUAL ALPHABET BOOKS

Another writing technique I use to teach beginning sounds is an individual alphabet book. First, I don't mandate this project. I introduce the idea and allow any children who would like to make these books freedom to do so during their free time or during times when I have available Parent Helpers to assist. I make small booklets of five pages each and pre-cut assorted letters available. A child may choose any letter he likes, but he must know four words that start with that letter. He glues his letter on the cover of his book and writes one word and a picture illustrating his word on each page. The immature child usually only writes the first letter of his word on each page, but at least that letter is reinforced and practiced. As the children become more sophisticated, the writing becomes more conventional. When the

booklets are complete, I hold them for the entire class to read together.

When I first started this project, I sent the booklets home after publishing. However, I realized that if I put them together in groups of Aa's and Mm's and Pp's and then hung them on our book board, other less secure youngsters could then use these existing books as resources for their own first efforts. It is interesting to note that many of the first alphabet books use the first letters of children's names. Harste, Woodward, and Burke,(1994), Hollingworth, Templeton, and Johns, (1986), and Clay,(1975) have found that young children usually show their understanding of the finite system of symbols by rearranging the set of letters found in their own names in a variety of ways.

Real Life Writing

I see a need to teach small children life skill writing which I'm calling "Real Life Writing" in some natural settings. In the Doll House area where we have several phones, we encourage children to make pretend calls and write messages to one another. In the past I assumed that by putting note paper and pencils in that center I was doing just that. However, I now realize that the skill must be taught first. To do so, I pair my children and give each pair a telephone, a chalk board, and some chalk. We practice making the phone calls, taking oral messages, and recording them on our chalkboards. We discuss using scribble messages, invented spellings of words that we know, and picture messages. We learn that phone numbers have seven digits and that we can manipulate them however we choose.

In the Store Center, I teach children how to write shopping lists using rebus pictures and invented spellings whenever possible. I ask my children if they can exchange shopping lists and come back from the store with everything their partners wanted. I teach the children how to use words and pictures to advertise special items available in the store when they are playing Store Manager.

To encourage letter writing, I brought a mail box into the classroom and made a mailman hat and bag. After learning that letters have a salutation, a body, and a closure, I encourage children to write letters to me and their peers. Most often the letters contain a "Dear Teacher, I love you., and a signature." Every day a mailman is chosen to deliver the mail.

In each of the above examples of writing, the impetus for the writing comes from the children, and the children do all the actual writing. The less mature children tend to use scribble writing and drawings, while the more mature children struggle with sounds of words and invented spellings. This kind of writing is valuable because its purpose is so obvious to the children, and most of them see it modeled every day.

Journals

During the summer of 1986, a friend of mine loaned me the book, **Language Stories & Literacy Lessons** by Harste, Woodward, & Burke, and I was shocked to discover that by not allowing my children time to write for themselves, I was cheating them of a valuable literacy tool. I still assumed that the way for Kindergarten children to write was through dictation to me or another adult in the room.

By introducing journals to my students the first day of school last September, I embarked on my new program of children doing their own writing. I staped five or six blank pieces of paper between two pieces of colored construction paper and called it a journal. On the first day, I asked how many children could write. Lucy Calkins(1986) said that 90% of all children start school believing they can write. Much to my chagrin, I found that only about 25% of my children felt that they could write. However, I quickly asked how many could hold pencils and make marks on paper, and all hands went up. I then went on to explain that it didn't matter that I couldn't read their writing as long as they could. When I asked how many children could read my writing, and only one child raised his hand, I reassured the group that with time and practice, we would probably learn to read one another's writing. After the children wrote and illustrated their stories, they read them to me. I then rewrote their stories in my writing so that later we could both reread the journals. I usually assigned a topic for the journal entry which tied into something we were studying for the week, ie. "Write one thing you remember that a seed needs to grow.", and we usually wrote in our journals once a week. At the end of

the month, I responded in writing to each child's journal before sending it home, usually leaving at least a page or two blank so that the child might continue his writing in his journal at home.

Diane Borgman in her article, "Whose Writing is it Anyway?" (1986) says that her children liked writing themselves because they found it easier. I did not find this to be so. My children worried about what they were going to write, how they were supposed to write, how particular letters were formed, and how to spell words. Nonetheless, I perservered because I was amazed at what I discovered about my children's knowledge of print. I asked my children to use any letters they knew or could hear whenever they could do so. As the year progressed and my children's experiences with written language increased, I saw their written language progress from scribbles to groups of letters with no sound-symbol relationships to use of beginning letters of words to beginning and ending letters of words, and finally in several cases, to definite word separations and the use of vowels. I watched words progress from left to right, from right to left, from top to bottom, and from bottom to top. Often I watched words written randomly all over the page. As I watched these emerging writers grow, I noticed that they were discovering the conventions of print through their own experimentations. Research shows that writing demands that the child pay attention to the details of print--letter features and letter sequences. Letter knowledge seems to expand outwards from a particular knowledge of a few letters. (Clay, 1975; Graves, 1983) Over and over I found myself telling the children to write only the letters they could hear and not to worry about how a word is

spelled. We can't be so concerned with the mechanics and conventions of written language that we impede the flow of thoughts and words of the young child. Again research validates this position. (Clay, 1975; Graves, 1983; Harste, Woodward, Burke, 1984; Hipple, 1985; Wiseman, 1984)

Although there is a great deal of research that says children need to choose their own writing topics, I found myself directing the journal writing. I justified my actions by asking my children to use their journals to rethink about an area of study we were currently working on. However, the last week of school, I told the children that as a whole class we were going to have a journal write for 15 minutes on any topic. The only rule in place was that no one could get out of his seat until the buzzer rang because I was going to write the entire time as well. I was amazed at the results. During the writing time, I watched some children fidgeting and playing with their pencils. Some children started with drawings immediately. Some children wrote with letters, and some wrote with scribbles. Some children were spelling words for other children. One little boy apologetically told me that he could only write his name, and so he did just that over and over again and drew a picture of himself. Another little girl wrote a poem using her name to rhyme: Heather, weather, feather, Heather, weather, etc. Another boy told me he just couldn't write that long, but proceeded to read me three separate one line stories complete with illustrations. And of course, some children wrote complete short stories.

It was a huge effort on all our parts, but one which I would highly recommend. While complex and different for each child, these exercises

suggest that every child can attach a symbol to a sight or sound. Early on, that symbol may have a meaning which is only decipherable by the child himself. However, because the child fails to conform to conventional symbols is not a reason to be discouraging or demanding toward the child. It is instead a time to rejoice that the abstraction necessary for written and complex verbalization is being borne in that child.

Diane Borgman(1986, p. 15) found that journal writing is a "must" in her Kindergarten because, "Children prefer to write their own stories, can read their own invented spelling more readily than the teacher's writing, develop a very strong sense of ownership or authorship even at an early age, respond positively to a sense of trust and respect for their writing, and write freely, without self-consciousness, when process rather than product is emphasized." For future journal writing activites, I would suggest helping each child establish a list of possible topics, and I would cease using this writing time as a directed activity. Instead I would question and talk with each child in an effort to help him use his own thinking and language skills to write something of his own making. Fluency is the goal for writers at this young age; it is a time for asking children to formulate and try out their ideas. The environment must of one of trust, warmth, and support.

Conclusion

A well balanced writing program must foster and nurture a child's need to communicate. Anne Dyson(1985) states, "We certainly do not want to promote writing by structuring writing lessons centered on practicing letter form or copying sentences--such lessons do not match young children's way of learning. Rather we need to weave print and opportunities for its use throughout the school environment."

Our teaching profession needs to acknowledge that children come to school already writing and ready to write some more, whether the form is drawing, scribbles, invented spellings, or conventional print. Again, Dyson(1985) states, "Defining writing more broadly might allow more children to see themselves officially as writers and would allow teachers more footholds from which to build--more ways of tapping children's interest in print."

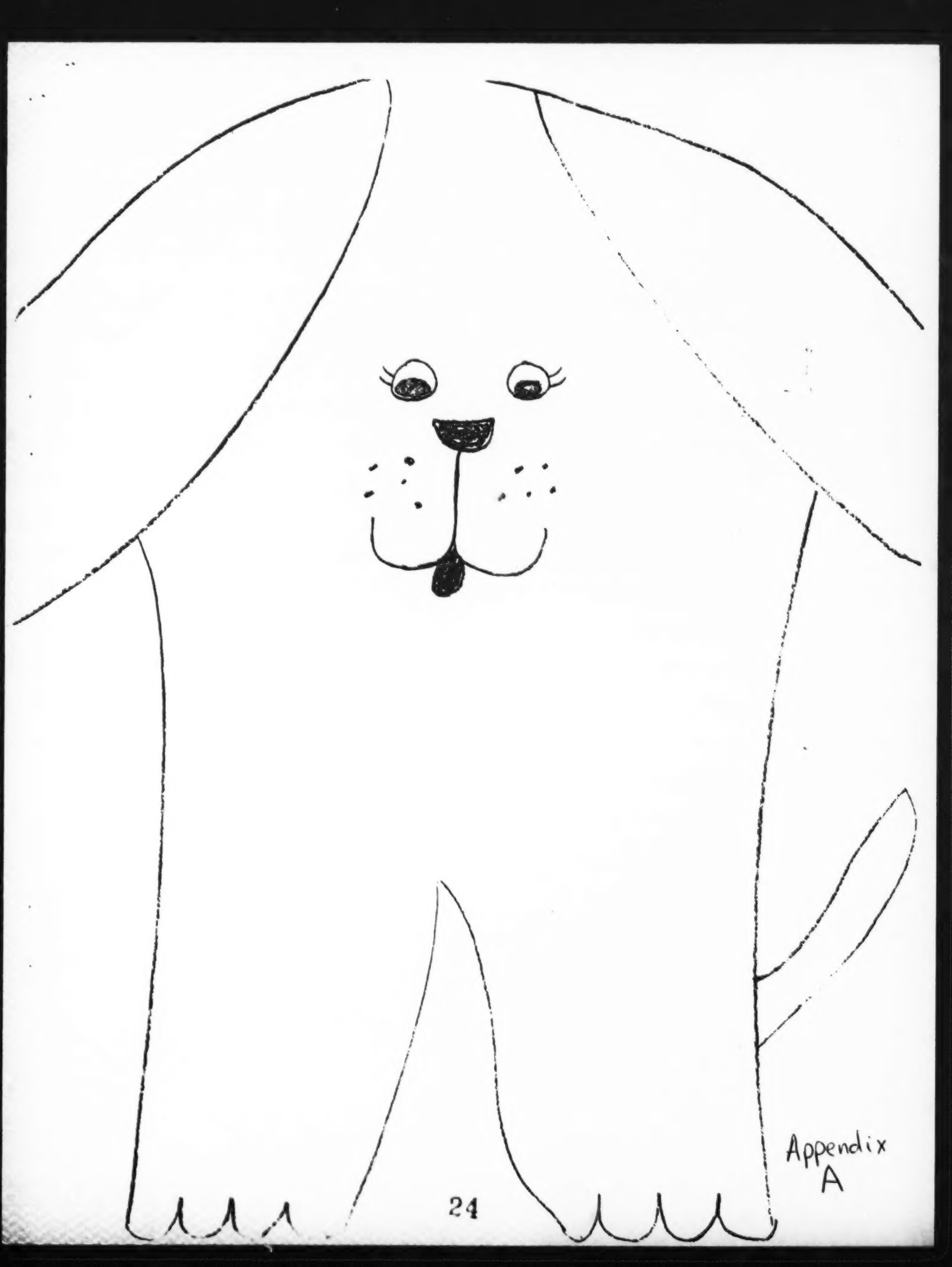
Teachers need to accept as well-placed building blocks the child's writing wherever it is--see all "errors" as interestingly correct. Only then is evaluation valid. Clay (1975, p. 2) states, "A creative writing programme can provide the teacher with an excellent source of evidence of a child's development if the teacher knows what the child was able to do one or two months previously and how his current product can be evaluated against that earlier work."

Obviously, reading and writing are interwoven--both stress words and meaning, and both demand that the child pay attention to letter features and letter sequence. When teachers use children's language as the source of the text to be read, success is almost guaranteed; the vocabulary

is understood, and the interest level is high. Clay (1975, p. 74)) states, "The child who fails in reading is almost always a child who has little or no writing vocabulary. This probably means that he is unable to analyse printed forms in any but disorganized ways."

Like talking, listening, and reading--all integral parts of a language arts program-- writing needs to be a required part of the everyday Kindergarten curriculum. In fact, writing is truly the common denominator which brings focus and cohesion to the talking, listening, and reading experiences. But writing is not one more subject to be taught. Rather it may very well be the thread by which teachers sew the fabric of the entire curriculum together--a way to allow children to make meaning of all that goes on around them. Graves, (1983, p. 15) states, "Writing is a marvelous unifier. We teachers have yet to make proper use of its powers in securing the deepest kinds of learning, in improving children's critical thinking, and in integrating the curriculum."

Writing for Kindergarten students is not a remote objective achieved only by upperclassmen whose prose and style meet accepted standards. Writing for young children unlocks the rooms where everything else becomes possible.



Appendix
A

Dear Parents,

We are doing "I Search" papers which are original pieces of research using interview as the primary source of information and which are written in the first person. This is a writing process which I hope will stimulate some exciting ideas and some beautiful new books.

I am asking you to be the recorder of these interviews to expedite the actual writing process for your child. When your child conducts the interviews, please try to write as much of the conversation as possible in as nearly the exact language as possible. REMEMBER--your child wants to know about your favorite things. We will use these inteviews to help the children establish opinions of their own.

Thank you for your cooperation in this new adventure.

Very truly yours,

Karen McGee

Karen A. McGee

Appendix B

FAVORITE THING I SEARCH INTERVIEW

1. Who is your favorite friend? Why?

2. What is your favorite thing to eat? to drink?

3. What is your favorite thing to feel?

4. What is your favorite shape? Why?

5. What is your favorite smell?

6. What is your favorite animal?

7. What is your favorite holiday?

8. What is your favorite thing to do?

Appendix C

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